

MEMOIR
OF
REV. PETER O'NEIL, P.P.,

BALLYMACODA, CO. CORK,

THE EXILED PRIEST OF '98,

PIONEER MISSIONARY OF AUSTRALIA ;

This Times and Contemporaries ;

By W. R.



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PREFACE.

N a summer's evening, some years ago, at the Antipodes, when the sun was after going down in the fiery splendour of that latitude, and the entrancing beauty of the scenery around Sydney harbour was brought out in all its intensity of unrivalled loveliness, the writer was asked about the life of an exiled patriot priest who belonged to his diocese, and who ministered to the convicts and aborigines in the very region the scenes of which we were then enjoying. He thereupon engaged on his return home to ascertain all the reliable information that could be obtained, and to transmit it to his friend.

It had lately been represented by some distinguished individuals that this biographical sketch, so intimately connected with the history of the fair and bright continent of Australia, should be brought out in a permanent form. Moreover, it was strongly represented that a memoir of an eminent confessor of the faith and nationality would possess special interest for the descendants of those who died in exile for love of the old land, and whose bodies repose beneath the glorious constellation of the Southern Cross.

Let these remarks serve as an apology, if such be needed, for the publication of a pamphlet written fifteen years ago.

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Memoir of Rev. Peter O'Neil.



CHAPTER I.

Birth and schooldays.—State of the country.—Dr. Crotty, Bishop of Cloyne.—
Lisbon.—Salamanca University.—Duke of Wellington.—Peninsular War.
—Irish and Spanish students.

A WILD and romantic spot in the parish of Conna, County of Cork, enjoys the honour of being the birth-place of the Rev. Peter O'Neil. On the 29th June, 1747, he first saw the light of day. He was descended from a respectable family that through every vicissitude of fortune and through many an ordeal of persecution adhered to the cause of creed and country. His grandfather came from the County Tyrone, and probably belonged to the clan that gave to Ireland the hero of Benburb. There was a tradition in the family that the grand-parents, to avoid "bondage and slaughter," had fled from the North.

It is, at least, an historical fact that many Catholic families, in order to save their lives, had to abandon home and sacrifice all their possessions after the Act of Settlement passed by the English Parliament in 1652. The ruin that at this period spread over the face of the country was dark and sorrowful beyond description; but the measure of her woes was not yet filled up. "The sword of the exterminator," says an historian, "had passed over the land, and the soldier sat down to banquet on the hereditary possessions of the natives." The grandfather must have saved something considerable from the wreck of his fortunes, for, at the time our heroic confessor was born, the family enjoyed a position of comparative independence.

As an illustration of the spirit of the O'Neils, an occurrence that took place after the burial of one of Peter's uncles may be worth recording. An apostate friar named Burdon was rector of the church of Mogeely, near Conna. In the graveyard attached to this church the remains were interred. After the funeral the uncles met at the house of their eldest brother. At supper it was noticed that the host was very sad and silent, and being asked the cause for being in such a mood, he replied that he feared his brother Daniel could not rest quietly in his grave as he would be annoyed every Sunday by the psalm-singing of that apostate. He would not so much mind a *natural* Protestant parson. That night the church was unroofed, and remains so up to the present.

The future levite was afforded the best education available to Catholics at the time. Owing to the tolerant policy of Lord Chesterfield, and the wholesome terror inspired by the victories achieved by the soldiers of the Irish Brigade on the Continent and in America, the penal laws had been somewhat relaxed or were not rigorously enforced.

Young O'Neil began his rudiments at a hedge school. Having drained the little well of learning at Inch, he was sent to a classical school at Kilworth, and while attending school there enjoyed the hospitality of a worthy farmer who resided near the town. From this school went forth many a scholar who obtained pre-eminence in different avocations of life. One of its alumni was Dr. Crotty, afterwards Bishop of Cloyne, the fame of whose vast and varied erudition was over all the colleges from Lisbon to Maynooth, and of each of the latter renowned seats of learning he was at successive periods a distinguished president. Whilst governing the Irish College at Lisbon he made the acquaintance and won the esteem of the leading Generals of the British Army during the Peninsular War. During the occupation of that city by the French under the notorious Juno, the Irish students suffered great privations, and could not venture, with safety, outside the precincts of the college. Subsequently, when the British Army rested for some days at Salamanca, many of the soldiers being Irish called to visit the students from their own land. The students were proud of the laurels won by their fellow countrymen in the different engagements, especially in the sanguinary one waged in the vicinity of the city.

When Lord Wellington entered Salamanca at the head of his victorious troops, "Nothing," says an eye-witness, "could be more animating than the scene. The day was brilliant, presenting all the glowing luxuriance of a Southern climate. Upwards of

fifty staff officers accompanied the British General ; they were immediately followed by the 14th Dragoons and a brigade of artillery ; signals of enthusiasm and friendship waved from the balconies ; the entrance to the Plaza was similar to a triumph ; every window and balcony was filled with persons welcoming the distinguished officer to whom they looked up for liberation and permanent relief."

The French had made themselves odious to the Irish students by reason of the terrible excesses they had been guilty of during the campaign. No wonder that here as at Lisbon the British troops were hailed with joy as deliverers.

Marmot, the commander of the French, with a powerful army of 47,000 men was posted on the right bank of the Duro ; Wellington was on the left. They marched in parallel lines for a whole day without coming to close quarters. Two divisions of the Allied Army were in a most critical position, and Marmot was determined to intercept and cut them off. Wellington, we are credibly informed, had as guides some of the students—Spanish and Irish—who were well acquainted with the country, and who knew the shallows of the river Duro and also the different ranges of the hills along its banks. The information proved invaluable. He safely got the bulk of his army across, out-mancœuvred Marmot so completely that, in conjunction with the other divisions, he was able to deliver a crushing blow before the French fully realised that he had crossed the river.

When Wellington asked leave of the College authorities to have the students act as interpreters in procuring supplies for the troops, the permission was not only cordially granted, but we are informed that the students actually sketched out the line of march from Salamanca to Madrid. It is well known that Wellington acknowledged the priceless services rendered on that occasion, and showed a grateful remembrance of them, at the passing of the Emancipation Act.



CHAPTER II.

Journey to Paris.—Bravery of an Irish student.—Capture of robbers.—College of the Lombards.—Distinguished alumni.

WHEN young O'Neil had acquired a solid classical and mathematical training, he was approved of, on the ground of virtuous conduct, as a suitable aspirant to the clerical state, and sent to the college of the Lombards, Paris.

The journey to Paris in those days was tedious and sometimes eventful. It was well known that the public roads in the neighbourhood of Paris, even so near as the forest, where at present is so artistically and esthetically laid out the famous Bois de Boulogne, were infested by highwaymen. The robberies and murders that occasionally took place caused such consternation that the diligences had to be escorted by a protection guard. It was only a short time before this that a large reward was offered for the capture of two notorious robbers. It was reserved for the bravery of an Irish student named Thomas Rice to accomplish what the *gendarmes* failed in effecting. This young student—a splendid type of the Celt—armed only with a blackthorn, was with the other passengers called on to “hold up.” After descending from the coach he suddenly attacked the two desperados, and with two swift and sure blows levelled them to the ground. To disarm them was the work of a moment. He then tied both of them firmly hand to hand with the only ligature available—his garters—and driving them before him into the city, to the astonishment of the Parisians, delivered them up to the Commissary of Police. He then proceeded on his way to the College as if after performing merely an ordinary feat. The public thanks of the executive authorities were conveyed to him through the president of the College, and whenever after in company with his fellow students he walked through the city he was lionized.

This was the College that received young O'Neil. It was indeed a fit institution for the training of the future confessors of the Irish Church, inasmuch as its halls were hallowed by the footsteps of such illustrious saints as Ignatius and Francis Xavier. The associations and traditions in connection with this old College were from every point of view grand and venerable. In its vaults repose the ashes of renowned scholars, amongst whom are reckoned Dr. McGuire, Archbishop of Armagh, and Morus, at one time rector of the University of Paris. The Irish College of Paris was

not as intimately connected with the University there as the Royal College of the Irish Nobles—"Coleegio de Nobles Irlanderes," as it was officially styled, at Salamanca, nor was it so highly endowed. For the Spanish Kings from Philip II. took a special and practical interest in the education and training of the exiled sons of Ireland. This was a splendid advantage to the students, inasmuch as that they could avail of the curriculum of a University recognised as the first, not only in Spain, but in all Europe. At the Vatican Council one of the Irish bishops, in behalf of his fellow-countrymen, returned special thanks to the Spanish bishops for the extraordinary kindness and hospitality extended to the Irish scholars during the dark and dismal penal times.

While in College our young levite met with an accident by which he lost his sight in the canonical eye. By special dispensation from Rome he was exempted from this irregularity. His career in College was very creditable. He filled the office of Professor of Celtic Literature for some time. Indeed, it would be difficult to find one possessing a more masterly acquaintance with the language of "saints and sages."

CHAPTER III.

Appointed P.P. of Ballymacoda.—Bishop MacKenna.—Doors of Church spiked at Shanagarry.—Peter versus Paul.—United Irishmen.—Informer ex-Sergeant Murphy shot.

AFTER his ordination as priest he returned home and laboured for five years without a fixed mission in several parts of his native diocese. When the parish of Ballymacoda became vacant, the people were anxious to have a curate then stationed in the parish appointed to the pastoral charge, and consequently refused to admit the priest whom the bishop, Dr. MacKenna, had nominated. They went so far in their opposition as to bar the chapel doors to prevent an entrance being effected. Thereupon, the priest who was appointed resigned his title to the parish. Dr. MacKenna, who was a prelate illustrious by reason of his learning and administrative qualities, and who would not tolerate any undue interference with the free exercise of his jurisdiction, looked around him for one able to cope with the opposition and bring the people to a sense of their duty. The choice fell on the

Rev. Peter O'Neil. The letter of his appointment came from Cove—the old name of Queenstown—and is dated 8th November, 1786. It is as follows :—

“Being answerable to the great God for the choice I make to fill vacant parishes with proper pastors, as the district of Ballymacoda is now vacant, and certainly wants a pastor conspicuous for good sense, prudence, discretion, zeal, and talents for instruction, we hereby assign and appoint you as pastor, whom we well know to possess those qualifications, and charge in conscience to labour strenuously in reforming and instructing said flock, as you have done in all places you have served hitherto, and charge said flock by virtue of the obedience they owe to you their pastor, and to me their superior, to show you due obedience and respect, and charge Rev. Mr. Dinahy to induct you properly.

✠ MATT. MACKENNA.”

When Fr. O'Neil presented himself at one of the chapels of the parish—the one at Shanagarry, which then belonged to the parish of Ballymacoda—he found the doors nailed up and no one inclined to receive him. A sturdy blacksmith came up and got into conversation with him. The fine appearance, gentlemanly bearing, and bland manner of the priest, made a favourable impression on him. Fr. O'Neil requested that at least they would permit him to celebrate Mass, and then they could act according to circumstances. The smith declared that it would be a pity to refuse the request of such an elegant gentleman. He volunteered to open the door, and, having procured a hammer, an entrance was effected, and the priest invited to enter. After the Gospel Fr. O'Neil addressed the congregation in the grand, old, melodious tongue, which was then the only one generally spoken by the people. He first put them in good humour. It appears that Paul was the name of the priest they refused to receive. “Well,” said he, “as you have sent away Paul, you cannot refuse to receive Peter.” The happy hit took. He continued to address them in eloquent terms, and before he finished his peroration he had conquered their hearts and gained their good-will. The rest of the parish received him cordially.

He entered on his duties with that zeal and indomitable energy that were so characteristic of the priests of that eventful period. Enthusiastic by temperament, fearless in danger, an impassioned patriot, and an ardent lover of the faithful peasantry, of simple and accessible habits, well versed in the old lore, and partial to the innocent amusements of his flock, he soon became the favourite of this romantic district. All the old people speak

of his priestly labours with a thorough admiration. As far as his duties permitted, he lived strictly according to rule. He was up at four o'clock all seasons of the year. After his morning devotions were over, the work of the day began. At all times he was prepared to hear confessions, and on Saturdays, and the eves of holidays, he was engaged in that work from morning till night. His round of duties was much the same as that of the priests of the present day. It consisted of visiting the sick, instructing the youth, and admonishing the wayward. He built two commodious chapels, and provided the parish with good schools. He was a rigid disciplinarian of ecclesiastical law. Out of his slender income he contrived to support many poor families, and it was no unusual thing to witness thirty or forty poor persons waiting for relief at his door. Like most of the priests of the day, he had a deep concern in the temporal welfare of his flock. He was their guide, philosopher, and friend. No heart could feel more tenderly the hardships and distress that he witnessed on every side.

Whatever share of prosperity the country enjoyed under a native Parliament, the Catholic population, then amounting to 3,000,000, shared in very little of it. Both Houses of Parliament were exclusively composed of Protestants. Every office of trust, honour, or emolument, was shut against them. Some enlightened Protestants, indeed, such as Curran, Grattan, and Charlemont, sympathised with the Catholics in their degradation, and laboured hard for their political and social emancipation. About this time (1791), was started the society of the United Irishmen. It was at first, in aims and action, perfectly legal and constitutional, and continued so until 1795. This society, when first founded, consisted chiefly of Protestants, though many eminent Catholics joined in at the start. The first sentence of the constitution of the club at Belfast is in these plain, moderate terms:—"1st.—This society is constituted for the purpose of forwarding a brotherhood of affection, a communion of rights and a union of power among Irishmen of every religious persuasion, and thereby obtain a complete reform in the legislature founded on the principles of civil, political, and religious liberty." It must, however, be admitted that some of the leading members were imbued with republican principles from the beginning; but, if the Government had granted just measures, these honest, but perhaps misguided men, would have been overruled and out-voted in the society. This society had its branches all over the country. The great mass of the people was united, and the Government got alarmed. The society was regarded as dangerous and seditious by the ruling powers. Proclamations

were issued against it, and thus it was changed into a secret and secretly organised body. A series of acts of repression and oppression were passed. An Insurrection Act passed making it death for anyone to take an oath of association; another empowering the Lord Lieutenant to proclaim counties. Magistrates got the power of breaking into houses and transporting to the navy all parties whom they suspected. Other acts, granting indemnity to magistrates for any illegality they may have been guilty of, giving the Lord Lieutenant power of arrest without bail, licensing the introduction of foreign troops and establishing the Yeomanry Corps, followed in quick succession. It is now established from State papers that the Government were determined to force the people into a rebellion, which they were prepared to crush, in order to rob Ireland of her native Parliament.

Fr. O'Neil warned his people against secret societies; but his people, maddened by oppressions and insults, unheeded the warnings and joined in numbers the Society of United Irishmen. About this time an ex-sergeant of the notorious North Cork named Murphy turned up in Ballymacoda. His wife was a native of the place. He had been convicted of attempting to swear-in a fellow-sergeant named O'Sullivan as member of the U.I. Society. He was sentenced to 500 lashes and transportation for life. No part of the sentence was put into execution, and he escaped from prison with the connivance of the authorities in order that he should become a spy and an informer. He was three months in Ballymacoda, and was actively employed in swearing-in the people. The leader of the organisation of the district was a Thomas O'Neil, who, while in Dublin engaged in a law suit some time previously, was sworn in as a member. This same Thomas O'Neil had caused considerable annoyance to Fr. Peter on several occasions. When Lord Thomond offered a site for a chapel, he refused to surrender his right unless paid ten pounds annually. Another site was selected, and a small village grew up adjacent to the chapel, and thus when the old chapel disappeared, which was situated on Thomas O'Neil's land, his holding was much depreciated in value. Owing to some preposterous claims and disorderly conduct on the part of the father of Thomas O'Neil, one of the galleries in the chapel erected by Fr. Peter was for a time interdicted by Bishop Coppinger. It may then be inferred that this O'Neil was no admirer of Father Peter. Murphy for a while escaped suspicion, and was regarded as a condemned deserter who had little love for British rule. It appears that some shrewd farmers whom he

wanted to enrol suspected his treachery and determined to watch his movements. Lord Shannon had in Castlemartyr a cowherd who was a half fool and a half knave. The farmers bribed this cowherd by giving him a quantity of tobacco, for which he had a great weakness, to watch the visitors to Lord Shannon. The cowherd reported that Murphy was holding interviews with Lords Shannon and Boyle, and that he would show the three in private conclave on a certain day and hour if the farmers would come to the old churchyard of Subulter, which is situated within the demesne, and hide themselves in the ivy. Accordingly they went, and, unobserved, saw Murphy in converse with the two lords, and overheard him giving information. They reported the matter to their neighbours, who were greatly alarmed. A meeting was held, to which Murphy was invited. Murphy attended, was placed under arrest, and charged with being a spy and an informer employed by the Government. He admitted the charge. They did not know what to do with him ; if they let him go, they were all completely in his power. They sent two of the members to consult Fr. O'Neil, who, after hearing the case, gave no decision on it, but went off on a sudden sick call to Shanagarry. The two returned and told the meeting that Fr. O'Neil did not say one word about what action they should take. Most of the night was spent by them in weeping and debating about what should be done, and at length they concluded that Murphy was to be shot. They took him to the ferry point at Ring, where he was shot by a man named Molloy, and another whose name is not known. His body was thrown into a deep hole in the river Fanisk and covered with a heap of stones. About a week after the Imokilly Yeomen, headed by Lords Shannon and Boyle, were scouring the country.

CHAPTER IV.

Arrest.—Flogging in Youghal.—State of the times.—Lord Moira.—Sir R. Abercromby.—Lord Holland.—Kilworth.—Spiked railing.—Transportation.—Voyage.—Sydney.—Aborigines.—Norfolk Island.—Convicts.—Fr. Harold.—Dante's Inferno.

THEY arrested several persons, and amongst others Mr. Pierce Fitzgerald, of Ballykenely. When Mr. Fitzgerald was being examined to find out what became of Murphy, he remarked "that probably Murphy, anticipating that search would be made

for him, had absconded ; and that it was surprising that while Murphy was to be seen daily for the last three months, that no enquiries had been made about him. Moreover, that report had it that he was often seen in consultation with their lordships." They made no reply to this, and Fitzgerald was allowed go free. After having examined several farmers from whom no information could be elicited, Thomas O'Neil was questioned, and he stated that if Fr. O'Neil had done his duty Murphy would not have been shot. He thereupon narrated to the lords the tragical event. A short time after a soldier called to the house of Fr. O'Neil and requested an interview with him. He stated that though he was a Protestant he would not wish that any punishment should befall a priest. He then detailed the conversation that he had overheard, which was to the effect that the priest was to be arrested. Fr. O'Neil thanked him for his kindness, and then told some relatives who were in the house what the soldier had stated. They counselled him to seek safety by flight, but he replied that he would not, like a hireling, abandon his flock, and that Providence would dispose of all things for the best. The officer commanding the soldiers, who were then encamped within a short distance of Ballymacoda, lost no time in arresting Fr. Peter, whom they brought into Youghal. In a Remonstrance, dated October, 1803, written by Fr. O'Neil himself, he details the cruel and barbarous treatment he received. From an oral account he gave the Rev. Justin McCarthy, late P.P. of Mallow, who was one of his curates, it appears that he was flogged with every species of brutality and insult. "Having," as he stated, "made up his mind not to utter even a single groan, as he knew that this would only cause pleasure to his tormentors, he bore the lashes inflicted on him without a single cry of pain. The officer in command of the flogging party, Lord Loftus, seeing this, said to those around him that he would make the Popish rebel groan, and for this purpose he ordered jagged scraps of tin to be knotted to the lashes of the cat with which he was flogged. The torture caused by the first blow he received from this fiendish instrument of cruelty, which wound round his body and tore away his flesh, was so great that he writhed with agony and made a convulsive effort to force himself away from the triangle to which he was tied. After having endured *two hundred and seventy-five* lashes he was unbound and conveyed back to prison." The Remonstrance states that several means were employed by the officers—commissioned and non-commissioned—to force from him a confession of guilt, and that he had answered one of the officers that he would suffer any

species of death rather than acknowledge a crime of which he was not guilty. His liberty was then offered to him if he would agree to a certain proposal. The proposal was that he would reveal the names of members of the Society of United Irishmen, which he was supposed to have known from the confessional. "But," he said, "justice and truth commanded me to reject it. When conducted to gaol I was presented with a refreshment. It appeared to me to be a mixture of wine and water, but it must have some powerful ingredient, for it speedily brought on a stupor. The same officer soon roused me from my lethargy with a renewed effort to extort an avowal from me that I was aware of the particulars of Murphy's death, and that I was sworn-in as an United Irishman. He drew his sword and declared that he would never depart from me until I should admit the latter charge in writing; he threatened that I should be forthwith led out again, flogged as before, shot, hanged, my head cut off to be exposed upon the gaol top, and my body thrown in the tide; that he would allow me but two minutes to decide. Then going to the door he called for a scrap of paper, while the sentinel swore terribly at the same time that he would blow out my brains if I persisted any longer in my refusal. Under this impression I scribbled a note to my brother, which they instantly cried out was all what they wanted. The precise expressions of it I do not at this moment recollect; it purported to be a wish that my brother might no longer indulge uneasiness on my account, for that I deserved what I got in atonement for the faults of my life. The officer withdrew. My sister-in-law then got admittance; she told me that she had just heard the sentry say that during my punishment nothing was elicited against me; however, that the paper I had just written would assuredly hang me. I exclaimed that their dreadful threats had compelled me to write something, and that I was so stupified that I did not understand fully what I wrote. This exclamation being conveyed to the officer, he returned next day; he called me to the gaol windows, commanding a view of the gallows, whereon two men were hanging, their bodies so bloody that I imagined that they wore red jackets. A third halter remained unoccupied, which he declared was intended for me should I persist in disclaiming the aforesaid note. 'Look,' said he, 'at those men; look at that rope; your treatment will be worse than theirs if you disown what you wrote yesterday,' adding that it was still in my power to get free. I then procured paper on which I wrote a formal protest against what had been extorted from me, so that should I be executed this protest might appear after my death."

To us living less than a century later such inhuman and diabolical treatment would appear almost incredible had not authentic history shown that similar treatment of Catholic priests was of frequent occurrence. From unimpeachable testimony we learn of unparalleled cruelties and barbarities on Catholics. Lord Moira, in a speech in the British House of Lords, shocked his hearers by describing the outrages and cruelties exercised by men abusing the power committed to them, and which formed part of a system. Sir Robert Abercromby was appointed to the command of the army at this time, but he threw up his command in disgust at the atrocities he could not control, and which he was too humane to witness. He declared that such was the licentiousness of the soldiers in Ireland that they were formidable to everyone but to their enemies. Lord Holland says in his memoirs of the Whig Party, "The fact is incontestible that the people of Ireland were driven to resistance by the free quarters and excess of the soldiery, which are not permitted in civilised warfare even in an enemy's country." Lord Cornwallis, the then viceroy, directly and positively asserts in his correspondence "that the country was driven into rebellion by violence and cruelty, that murder was the favourite pastime of the militia." In a letter to General Ross he writes "that even at his own table, where he did his best to prevent it, the conversation always turned on hanging, shooting, and burning, etc., and that if a priest had been put to death the greatest joy was expressed by the whole company."

The present writer often heard his father narrate instances of the savage and brutal treatment experienced by priests, even within a comparatively recent period, at the hands of low-bred Orangemen. One evening, about twenty years ago, a number of gentlemen were enjoying the hospitality of the P.P. of Kilworth. After dinner the party took a stroll into the garden, and during conversation a gentleman remarked that it was a strange thing that all the spikes on the railing were filed off and unornamental caps put on the bars. "It is so," remarked my father, "but the explanation is stranger still." He thereupon told how the P.P. of the parish, a contemporary of Father O'Neil, had accepted an invitation to dinner from a person named Anderson, who was a rabid Orangeman. Before dinner was over the members of the family grossly insulted and brutally beat the old priest. As he was leaving the house, with his garments all torn, he pulled off his inner tunic, covered, as it was, with his blood, and threw it back into the hall with a malediction. The malediction told. It was a notorious fact that every member of that family met with a tragical

end. Anderson had four sons. One of the sons murdered his eldest brother, for which he was executed. The third son, while attempting to vault over the railing before them, was impaled on the spikes and died in untold torture. Hence the flogging off of the spikes. The fourth son emigrated to South Africa, where he was devoured by a lion ; and the fifth and last of the race, according to the testimony of the Protestant minister who was called in to attend him, died the death of the reprobate. The signal retribution that even in this life overtook the betrayers of Father Sheehy, who was innocently executed in Clonmel, was not greater or more terrific than that which befel some of those miscreants who took part in the unjust and barbarous punishment inflicted on Father O'Neil, as shall be recorded later on.

From Youghal the poor priest was sent to Duncannon, and then put on board the transport Princess Charlotte at Waterford. On board this vessel were many political prisoners, including six Presbyterian ministers from Ulster, and two medical students. The medical students were arrested at the ferry at Youghal, and not being able to produce passports, were brought before the magistrates at Clashmore. Their portmanteaux were searched and nothing found in them more incriminating than some medical prescriptions, and a copy of verses by Dr. Walcot, or as he was called, Peter Pender. The copy of verses were handed to Robert Power the presiding magistrate, who having read them, declared that there was as much treason in them as would poison an entire nation. Thereupon, the students were condemned and sentenced to be sent to Duncannon for transportation. While on board the Princess Charlotte the students formed a plot with the other prisoners to seize the vessel, run her aground, and then carry off her guns and amunition to the camp at Vinegar Hill. One of the Presbyterian ministers disclosed the plot to the Captain who took steps to defeat the project, and immediately set sail for the Cove of Cork. On arriving at Cove, the prisoners were transferred to a larger vessel destined for Botany Bay. While in Cove a Rev. T. Barry died on board the Convict Ship. Father O'Neil remained on board the transport in Cork Harbour for about ten months, and while there by order of the Lord Lieutenant a court of enquiry was held under General Graham to investigate his case. "Before this Court," he states in his Remonstrance, "I was not brought nor any friend of mine summoned to speak for me. It was even a subject of sarcastic remark in the prison ship, that whilst I stood there among the sailors my trial as it was termed, was going on in Youghal. With the proceedings of that Court I am to this day

unacquainted. It was ordered, I know, in consequence of a memorial upon my situation, handed to a distinguished Nobleman, and by him presented at the Castle ; I was not consulted with regard to its contents. Unfortunately for me, it was penned with more zeal than accuracy, setting forth, among other hardships, that after my punishment, I had been left without medical assistance (on the report of my Sister-in-Law, who visited me within the interval between the whipping and apothecary's arrival) ; it further stated that I had been *whipt and thrown into a dungeon* ; instead of stating as it ought have done, that I had been *thrown into a dungeon and whipt*. This inversion was fatal to me. For the evidence of Mr. Green, Apothecary, most plausibly contradicted those allegations of the memorial ; and that circumstance when coupled with subsequent horrible charges audaciously *forged* and *foisted* into the Minutes of the Inquiry, excited an almost invincible prejudice in the mind of the merciful Lord Cornwallis against me. For, when, after a considerable lapse of time, my professional friend in Dublin renewed his efforts to save me, at the risk of being deemed importunate and troublesome, he was still graciously honoured with an audience, wherein to preclude all future interference, as quite ineffectual and hopeless his Excellency directed Colonel Littlehales' to read these minutes to my patron. They reported that I had freely avowed to Mr. Green, Apothecary, while he was dressing my wounds, at the time I was about to be sent on board the prison-ship, that I deserved all I had suffered and more ; for I was privy to the murders, etc., etc., committed in my parish ; that I could account for my conduct in no other way, than by attributing it to the instigation of the devil ; and that I deserved to be shot. The cruel edge of this forged evidence was still further whetted by subjoining to it that Green was a Catholic. My respectable intercessor, being quite unprepared to meet such an accusation hung down his head and withdrew. But he lost no time in communicating this reverse to my Ordinary—Dr. Coppinger who was equally astonished at these assertions ; but who seized the opportunity until a refutation of all could be procured, to point, in the interim to the designing and notorious falsehood of Mr. Green's *Catholicity*. In a few days Mr. Green himself spontaneously furnished my bishop with a peremptory denial of the above particulars, under his own hand ; declaring moreover, in a written acknowledgement, that no conversation had passed between him and the prisoner, but as between *a medical man and his patient*. The Deputy Judge, Advocate General, Major Ellis has been pleased to transcribe these minutes as far as they regard Mr.

Green, who presented himself at the parish chapel of Ballymacoda offering to make oath, that he had not given the evidence attributed to him."

The original document in reply to a fresh representation made in behalf of Father O'Neill is in existence. The following is an exact copy.

"Dublin Castle, 30th June, 1800.

SIR,—I have the honour to receive and to lay before my Lord Lieutenant, your letter of the 28th instant, with its enclosure, and am directed to acquaint you, this his Excellency's commands have been this day conveyed to Major General Myers, to take the Rev. Peter O'Neill from on board the Anne Botany Bay ship, in Cork Harbour, and to cause him to be imprisoned until further orders, but not to treat him with harshness or severity.

I have the honour, etc.,

E. B. LITTLEHALES."

Before the order arrived the vessel had sailed away. A few incidents in connection with the voyage are well authenticated. The captain of the vessel was a humane man, but the mate a Cornish man, was a harsh brute. One day as they were near the West Indies, the mate killed one of the convicts by striking him with a cannon ball. The only cause assigned for the blow was that the poor fellow had spilled something on the deck. So enraged were the other convicts at this that they broke into mutiny, overpowered the soldiers and sailors, took possession of the vessel and determined to sail to the Isle of Martinique. After holding possession of the vessel for two hours they submitted, by the advice of Father O'Neil, to the authority of the captain. It was well that they had done so, for a short time after an English man-of-war hove in sight, and signalled to know whether any assistance was wanting. The captain signalled back that all was right. Two days after this occurrence as the Captain and Father O'Neil were sitting together in the fore-castle, a sailor was sent up the fore-mast to do something. The mate not liking how the thing was done, went up likewise. Suddenly a rope broke, and down the mate came head foremost on the anchor, and his brains were scattered on the captain and the priest. When the latter remarked that this looked like 'blood for blood,' the captain concurred in the justness of the remark, and, forthwith, ordered all the handcuffs and chains to be taken off all the convicts. It was only when they approached Rio de Janeiro, where there were some British men-of-war vessels stationed, that, as a mere matter of form, the convicts were again put in chains. On arrival at Rio, Father O'Neil was allowed to go

ashore. He went to a convent where he celebrated Mass, and got all the requisites for offering the Holy Sacrifice during the rest of the voyage. As soon as they had cleared the harbour of Rio, the convicts were unloosed until they approached the Cape, they were again allowed freedom of their limbs.

During the voyage the priest assembled the Catholic convicts every day for the recital of the Rosary, and no more edifying and touching spectacle could be witnessed than to behold those poor exiled children of Erin assembled to praise the 'Star of the Sea,' and to invoke the powerful intercession of the 'Hope of the Wanderer.' As they neared the Australian coast they encountered a dreadful storm. The vessel was being driven towards a huge iceberg. The captain declared that all was over with them, and that no one would survive to tell the tale of their loss, as assuredly the vessel would be dashed to pieces on the huge mountain of ice. The priest at once assembled the Catholic convicts. They all knelt down, and amid the howling of the winds and the roaring of the waves, recited the Rosary, entreating of God, through the intercession of His Blessed Mother, to save them from their impending doom. The Rosary was scarcely finished when the storm subsided, the wind veered about, and soon the danger passed away. The dreary voyage was at last coming to an end, and the poor convicts were straining their wistful eyes to get a glimpse of the strange land, which was to be for them, not a land of promise, but rather a land of bondage. Morning dawned, and they were up to view the enchanting beauty of Port Jackson, a harbour that the writer of fifty novels and a fluent master of the English language, Mr. Trollope, confessed his inability to describe. In grandeur and loveliness it stands unrivalled. Though the scenery was one of surpassing picturesqueness, and the sky of more than Italian brightness, still bitter tears coursed down the furrowed cheeks of the poor Irish exiles as they thought of the dear old island far away at the other side of the globe. Often, after they had crossed the line, had they gazed with rapturous wonder on the glorious constellation—the Southern Cross—that signalled to them hope and victory through their faith. Before landing, all the convicts, not excepting Father O'Neill, were again put in chains. Most of the Government officials and their wives drove down to witness the disembarking. When the priest landed a well-dressed lady approached with tears in her eyes, and asked in Irish whether he recognised her. He could not well recollect at the moment where he had seen her before. She then reminded him that she was at one time a servant in his own house at Bally-

macoda, and told him how, after having left her situation, she hired with a Protestant family in Youghal; that while in service with that family some valuable plate was stolen; that suspicion fell upon her, and that she was tried for robbery and transported to Botany. Soon after the thief was discovered, and an order came out for her liberation. Providence watched over her; she conducted herself as a virtuous girl, and got a wealthy and respectable husband. The Captain lost no time in informing the Governor of the admirable conduct of the convicts during the voyage. He represented to him that most of them were guilty of no criminal offence; that they were merely charged with political crime into which they were in several instances led unwittingly by illegal societies. The governor soon after liberated many of them who found employment amongst the settlers. Some of the descendants of these exiles occupy to-day the largest and most responsible positions in the Colonies.

Father O'Neil, owing to the kind favour of Major Foveaux was allowed exercise his ministry, and his efforts to console the poor convicts, and to make them reconciled with their hard lot, were blessed with signal success. He must also have spread the light of the Gospel amongst the natives in the district around Port Jackson, which was the only part of the Continent that was then explored. For, in a letter sent him after his return home from a brother convict—Father Dixon—mention is made of the great loss the natives suffered by his departure. I have not been able to find the original of this letter, but have been assured by a near relative of Father Peter's, who saw it, that it contained the following sentences—"My dear Brother where is the assistance you promised me? I fear if it does not come soon, the convicts will turn out and the natives will return to their old ways—W. Dixon." The Rev. W. Dixon had been transported a short time after Father Peter on account of his supposed rebellious tendencies. He was pardoned after a few years and returned home. And, now, in the language of General Holt, the Irish rebel chief, they were left without a priest or minister of any kind, or preacher, except a barn ranter, whom neither Catholics nor Protestants would listen to. For ten years after the departure of Father Dixon, the rites of the Church were not performed. In 1818 a priest arrived. He was a free man, and was directly appointed from Rome. This was the Rev. Jeremiah O'Flynn. Informed of the necessity of a Government sanction for going to a penal settlement, he sent in his application; but as a vessel was just on the eve of sailing, and as no other was expected for several months, he directed a friend to

forward the permit (which he viewed as a mere formality), and took his passage at once. Upon his arrival at Sydney he was warned by some of the Roman Catholics, of the bondage in which they were placed, of the prejudices which would be excited against him as a priest, and of the certainty of his punishment if discovered without the Government sanction. He, therefore, very prudently concealed himself. In the meanwhile, as several months must intervene before the next mail would arrive, the leading members of his religion got up a memorial to the governor representing the case, and requesting his recognition of the priest's arrival. The presentees of the petition were coolly told that they were guilty of a piece of presumption. Unfortunately Father O'Flynn made too sure of the success of the application, and incautiously presented himself out of his retreat. Certain parties were on the look out and caught him. He was immediately led as a common felon to gaol. As there was no law to punish him, for he was a British subject, it was resolved to get rid of him. A vessel was then sailing; when the sails were spread the prisoner was carried on board and shipped back again to England. The indignity and cruelty towards one of their own nation, and to a priest of their own faith, were enough to set the Irish Roman Catholics in rebellion against the Colonial Government. They were, however, used to subjection, and yielded with ill-suppressed execrations against the authorities. The Rev. Dr. Ullathorne, afterwards Roman Catholic Bishop of Birmingham makes an interesting allusion to the visit paid by the colonial Catholics to the Blessed Sacrament left by Father O'Flynn at the house of a settler. It appears that he had not got time to remove it. The poor Catholics kept candles lighting night and day before it for two years: "It is remarkably beautiful," said the priest, "to contemplate how those men of sorrow served their Bread of Life, bowed down before the Crucified; no voice but the silent one of faith; not a priest within ten thousand miles to offer them that pledge of pardon, whose near presence they see and feel." This tyrannical act on the part of the governor caused a great storm of indignation in England, when the subject was brought before Parliament by Mr. Hutchison, M.P. for Cork, and led to the appointment of two priests with a salary to minister to the spiritual wants of the Colonists. One of those priests was Father Terry a member of an old and respectable Cork family. This priest made his mark in the history of the colony.

At home the friends were not idle in vindicating the character of the P.P. of Ballymacoda. Some influential persons, such as Lord Shannon, Archbishop Troy, and Dr. Coppinger took up his

case. A letter from the Bishop of Cloyne, of which the following is a copy, addressed to the brother of Father O'Neil, informs him of the result of applications to the Executive :—

“My Dear Sir—I am highly gratified at being authorized by Dr. Troy to inform you that his renewed application to the Government in favour of your much injured brother has been crowned with success. He presented the memorial drawn up by you. An order from the Government was sent off last Thursday to Botany Bay, that the Rev. P. O'Neil be forthwith sent back to Ireland. The Lord Lieutenant desires that the matter be but little spoken of, and by no means admitted into the newspapers.

I am, faithfully yours,

Midleton, June 2nd, 1800.”

W. COPPINGER.

The first intimation Father Peter received of his recall was in a letter from one of his friends at home, who expressed surprised at his delay in returning. On calling on the governor he was informed that the recall had come, but that the governor seeing the great good he was affecting was anxious, if possible, to detain him in the Colony, and allow him a yearly salary of £200, and hence the notification of his recall was delayed. Father Peter represented that he had some family affairs to arrange in Ireland, and promised to return and bring two other priests. The governor observed on the occasion that he would be more useful in keeping the convicts in order than all the soldiers he had. It was Father Peter's fixed resolve to return, but the friends at home and his parishioners succeeded in getting him to give up the notion. The copy of pardon in the possession of the writer proves that he was for some time in Norfolk Island. It is as follows, taken from the old original parchment :—

“I do hereby certify that Mr. O'Neil has permission from his Excellency, Governor King, to leave this Island, and to return to Ireland.

Norfolk Island, 15th January, 1803.”

J. FOOCAUL.

Of his sojourn in Norfolk Island, nothing of any importance can be ascertained from his friends. However we glean some slight information from the letter of a brother convict—Father Harold, P.P. of Kilcullen of the diocese of Dublin, who unjustly suspected of complicity in the rebellion was transported about ten months before Father Peter. The transport *Minerva*, with Father Harold on board sailed from Cove in August, 1799. He had as fellow prisoner, General Holt, who having submitted after the defeat at

Ross, on promise of pardon, was transported to Botany Bay. The horrors and tortures endured by the convicts on the voyage as described by Holt was appalling. In a letter from Norkfolk Island dated January 8th, 1803, to a relative, Father Harold refers to Father O'Neil as a kind and faithful friend, "who," he writes, "brought with him a property sufficient to afford us the necessaries of life, and had just as much left as paid his passage, &c., when his release arrived. Every shilling he could spare he left me, but any consideration of this nature is but a miserable compensation for his absence."

Dr. Ullathorne in his charming autobiography states that he was the first clergyman to land in this island. This, as we have seen, is a mistake. The present writer some years ago met a priest who was for ten years chaplain to the convicts on this island, and the description of the scenes of torture and suffering he witnessed shall never leave my memory. Dante's *Inferno* would scarcely surpass it in horror and vividness. And yet this island is depicted by a valiant soldier and classic writer as one of the most beautiful spots in creation.

Strange—that where Nature loved to trace
 As if for Gods, a dwelling place,
 And every charm and grace had mixed
 Within the paradise she fix'd.
 There man enamoured of distress
 Should mar it into wilderness.

It is only the caustic pen, dipped in vitriol, of a Sydney Smith that could depict the evils of the convict system as carried out in Norfolk Island. The home government got some inklings of it, and accordingly, the poor outcasts were temporarily transferred to Tasmania in 1807, when Father Harold bade farewell to the island of Pines. His pardon came three years later, when broken down and helpless from the terrible hardships he suffered, he returned home through America. He died in 1830 and sleeps the sleep of the just in Richmond Cemetery.



CHAPTER V.

Liberation.—Restoration to his Parish.—Dr. Coppinger.—Lord Chancellor Redesdale.—“Remonstrance.”—Fate of Persecutors.—Missionary Work at Home.—Death.

To return to the subject of the memoir. When Father O'Neil received his pardon he lost no time in returning home, and on a Sunday morning entered his parish church to hear Mass. Some of the people who noticed him in the church, and who thought that he was then at the antipodes, were as startled as if it were his apparition that appeared. During his absence another priest named Father O'Brien was appointed parish priest. Owing to the terrible sufferings he had endured, the bishop had no hopes that he would survive to return home. There must have been some difficulty in the way of his restoration, for the matter was discussed at the conference of the Deanery held at Castlemartyr. The letter of his Ordinary restoring him to his parish implies that some obstacles, either canonical or political, stood in the way. On the 29th July, 1803, Dr. Coppinger addressed a letter of which the following is a transcript:—

“My Dear Sir—Though for reasons stated I intended to postpone my acquiescence in your demand till I should have the expressed sanction of the prelates now in Dublin; yet weighing the motives you assign and the hardships of your case likely to be augmented by delay, I forego my design, and hereby agree to your resuming your parochial functions in the parish of Ballymacoda, after my letter to Mr. O'Brien on this subject shall be delivered to him in your presence by the Rev. J. Scanlon, whom I thought it necessary to depute as my express negotiator on this occasion.”

I am, with affectionate esteem,

Yours truly,

✠ “W. COPPINGER.”

The Mr. O'Brien to whom reference is made was translated to Doneraile and afterwards appointed Vicar General of the diocese of Cloyne.

When it became known that Father O'Neil was to be restored to his parochial rights which, indeed, he had never forfeited, the Orange press raised a storm, and even Lord Redesdale, the Irish Lord Chancellor wrote on the subject in a tone of bitterness and bigotry. In one paragraph in his letter to Lord Fingal, the Chancellor stated that this priest was brought back in triumph by his Superior to

what in defiance of the law he called his parish. This drew from Dr. Coppinger an admirable reply in which he exposed the Chancellor's ignorance of law and matters of fact. Lord Redesdale amongst other statements maintained that the existence of the Catholic Clergy of Ireland was not recognised by law. This assertion was specially taken up by the Bishop, who from the statutes passed in the reign of Queen Anne, and the 21 and 22 of George III, showed up the Chancellor's ignorance, and made him a fit subject for the ridicule and contempt of Curran and other legal wits.

Neither the learning nor the exalted position of Dr. Coppinger was sufficient to protect him from danger and insult: for, some years after he was obliged, in order to save his life from the Orange ruffians, to flee from Youghal by night disguised as a groom, and was not secure from danger until after a long and tedious journey he arrived at the residence of the Earl of Kenmare in Killarney. This prelate was the unceasing and uncompromising opponent of the Veto, which would practically hand over the appointment of bishops to the ministers of the Crown, and thus enslave the Catholic Church of Ireland, and make her like the Protestant Church at present, the mere creature of the State. His literary labours are well known. Besides other productions which were scholarly and able, he left an admirable translation of the Imitation of Christ, which is now universally and profitably used.

The time now came for the vindication of the character and conduct of Father O'Neil. On the 23rd October, 1803, he published what he styled a Remonstrance which he addressed to the nobility and gentry of the County of Cork. In this pamphlet he shows that there was not the slightest proof of the charges brought against him—the chief of which was that he sanctioned the murder of the informer, Murphy. He challenged his accusers to produce even the slightest grounds for proof of his supposed complicity. The principal accuser had left a declaration in which he solemnly stated that Father O'Neil was innocent of even connivance at the murder. The character of the poor priest was cleared up in a singular and providential manner. All who had taken part in his punishment or betrayal met with sad and tragical deaths. The man who seized the reins of his horse when he was arrested, lost the use of his hand which had afterwards to be amputated; and to use the expressive words of the "old people," "the grave received his hand seven years before it received his body." The person who gave information against him was hanged on a lamp post in Cork, as leader of the United Irishmen in the district, and so was

the instigator of the shooting of the informer, ex-sergeant Murphy : while those who actually perpetrated the deed were liberated as having been, in the opinion of General Meyers the officer who presided at the Courtmartial,—merely minor accomplices. It is the current tradition amongst the people of the parish, that the officer who commanded the flogging party, committed suicide. He was continually trying to appease his troubled conscience by constantly repeating that it was not he, but the law, that flogged the priest. All his sons met with sudden and calamitous ends. Up to the present day many of the old inhabitants of Youghal give circumstantial details of the miserable lives led by those who insulted the priest whilst on the triangle. There was one man named——, who grinned at him whilst he was undergoing the flogging. It was notoriously remarkable that whenever this man appeared abroad he could not walk more than a few paces without stopping and then gazing up, as if at some object, and grinning. It would be too long to detail the many other instances of the vengeance of Providence on the insulters of this priest.

During thirty five years after his return from banishment, Father O'Neil laboured zealously in his parish. One instance will suffice to show this indomitable energy, namely, that in *one* and the *same* year he built the churches of Ladysbridge and Shanagarry. He laboured up to very day of his death. On the morning of the feast of S.S. Peter and Paul 1835, he went to his church intending to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice, but as he approached the altar he found that he was unable to do so. He returned home, received the last rites with fervour and resignation, and died next day at the grand age of 88. In person, he was tall, well-shaped and a handsome presence. He was regarded as a ripe and deeply read scholar. In the poesy of words with which his eloquence clothed every idea, he was simply grand, and for originality of ideas, he was as fresh as the breath of the ocean or the fair hills of his beloved Ballymacoda. He descended to his last repose regretted and revered by the people, and many an elegy of tenderest pathos and beauty composed by local poets in the native dialect, expressed the grief of his bereaved flock. A chaste and ornate monument is erected over his grave. And so, after his chequered life and wanderings over many seas, this grand old soldier of faith and fatherland calmy sleeps in the graveyard attached to the magnificent church of Ballymacoda. Near his tomb under a large Celtic Cross lie the remains of his grand nephew, Peter O'Neil Crowley the martyr patriot of '67. Surely, Irish soil does not contain relics dearer to the Nation's heart.

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